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## AN ENGLISH CONTRIBUTION TO GERMANY

By BERTHA REED COFFMAN

THE political revolution which has stirred Germany for many months recalls the stormy days of 1848, as a result of which a million or more Germans came to America to secure freedom of thought. We scarcely realize that Germany contributed to us at that time the best she had to give. The student of literature, wishing to go back to the beginnings of democratic ideals in Germany, need not go far into the past to find the first expressions of that love of liberty which, though almost stifled at times, has remained alive and has finally broken out into a terrible conflagration.

It is significant that the first embers were kindled at English altars as late as the early eighteenth century. These precious coals were carried to Germany by a young poet, Friedrich von Hagedorn, who was in London from 1729 to 1731. Inspired by Addison, Pope, Prior, Thomson, Shaftesbury, and Bolingbroke, he accepted enthusiastically the English point of view, which they represented, and on his return to Hamburg shared his new-found ideas with his fellow writers.

Up to the time of Hagedorn's visit in England, flattery of the ruling princes played an important part in the contemporary literature. Weichmann's *Low Saxon Poetry*, published between 1725 and 1732, may be regarded as typical of the best poetry of the period. Brockes, Richey, Amthor, and Pietsch, leading writers of the time, contributed to it. This collection of poems, abounding in servile praise of the nobility, was esteemed most highly by contemporary critics. The popularity of fawning poems in honor of rulers is attested by the large number of them which were written. Even Hagedorn himself in one of his early effusions called Frederick the Great the "saviour of the country."

Brought up in Hamburg, one of the first German cities to adopt English ideas and customs, taught in the *Gymnasium* by promoters of the *Hamburger Patriot* (the best of the German periodicals modeled after the *Spectator* and other English moral weeklies), and trained at the University of Jena in the new rationalism of

Wolff, he was prepared for the love of freedom which permeated England. As a result of Hagedorn's stay in London and his devotion to English literature, he introduced several innovations into the literature of his own country. By no means the least of these was the new spirit of freedom, which he embodied in his own poetry after his stay in England. The following lines from his poem, *Desires*, proclaimed to Germany his new-found independence:

Thou, lovely child of heaven, thou fountain of all joy,  
Not bought with lands or gold, or favor of a lord,  
O Freedom! Give me thee, companion of my heart,  
No ruler shall henceforth be troubled with my prayers.

Hagedorn's exaltation of freedom rather than of kings was a clarion call such as had never been sounded by his contemporaries. The only other writer who deserves mention in this connection is Albrecht von Haller, whose influence was, however, very limited. It gives us more than a little pleasure to know that with Hagedorn the spirit of freedom and England were synonymous. Not wishing to leave any doubt as to where his sympathies were, he called himself "half English." His enthusiasm for the English people reached its height in *The Wise Man*, when he exclaimed:

How noble is the spirit of true Britons!  
Their wealth but serves to scatter knowledge wide.  
All they have gained through barter and in battle  
They gladly share with those who most deserve.  
The nation gives its people power and freedom:  
The rich then give to learning their support.

It is in connection with this eulogy of the British people that we find Hagedorn's most beautiful apostrophe of freedom;

O Freedom! There alone thou findest joy.  
Thou, pride of towns, delight of country wide,  
Warm as the sun and like the sea in strength,  
Thou shinest clear with all-embracing light.

It required courage in Hagedorn's time to break with the custom of flattering rulers and assert the right to think as nobly even as princes; yet he uttered fearlessly the challenge:

But who is great? That man who boldly stands  
And freely thinks as if he were a prince.

For the next century love of freedom was an important note in the literature of Germany. In the minds of the people it probably reached its highest point in 1848. If the country had not lost at that time her best democratic blood, the recent war might never have been. The descendants of those fiery emigrants would have aided in developing a different Germany from the one which we have been fighting. However, it is futile to speculate about what might have been. But it is significant that the spirit of liberty which has dominated the English speaking people since the days of King John has been an element in German literature for less than two centuries and that it was a direct contribution to German literature from England.

*Grinnell College*